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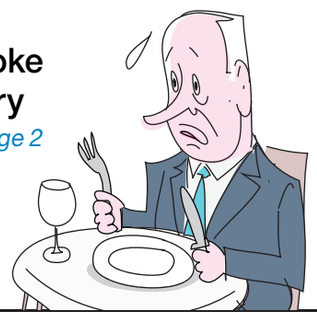

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# Friedman urged PM to annex, then came Kushner

## Speaking to Israeli journalists, ambassador downplayed certain elements of peace plan

**Noa Landau**

A demonstrative shrug by a senior member of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's entourage on the plane home from his visits to Washington and Moscow pretty much said it all on Thursday.

Reporters aboard the plane asked what had changed between the bombastic statements about annexing all the settlements as early as next week's cabinet meeting, and the ice-cold water poured on it by the White House on Wednesday. "I hope nothing has changed," he replied.

Later, a tortuous explanation was offered. It was all just a "technical problem." According to another senior official aboard the plane, who was asked to explain the confusion, Israel wanted to annex the Jordan Valley, the northern Dead Sea and the West Bank settlements as a kind of first instalment, and then, in a second wave, the areas around those settlements, for a total area of 30 percent of the West Bank. "But the Americans only want it all in one go, and this will take time."

Obviously, this "technical" explanation doesn't reflect the whole reality. In numerous briefings and interviews in recent days, senior U.S. officials – including current and former members of the "peace team" headed by Jared Kushner – made it clear that there's a more fundamental problem: Netanyahu's rush to annex is ruining the launch of the plan on which they labored for three years. Immediate annexation wasn't their intention. And the announcement wasn't even coordinated with them.

The story gets even more intricate. According to Israeli and American sources, the person urging Netanyahu to annex straight away was none other than U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman – a generous donor to the settlement enterprise, who

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**Naama Issachar arriving home in Rehovot on Thursday. Putin credited mostly her mother for the pardon. A senior Israeli official said Israel did not sign a deal for her release.** *Ilan Assayag*

# Israeli returns after Putin grants pardon

**Noa Landau**

An Israeli-American woman jailed in Russia over drug charges in a high-profile case landed in Israel on Thursday, ending a months-long saga between the two countries.

"I just want to say thank you," Naama Issachar, who was pardoned by Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday, told reporters upon landing. "I am still in shock from the whole situation, but I am grateful for everything."

The prime minister told reporters during the flight to Israel that Israeli officials had taken special interest in her release of Naama Issachar, because there was a danger to strategic relations with Russia.

"Why did we intervene in her case and not others? Because our relationship with Russia is crucial strategically," Netanyahu said, "A military clash in Syria with Russian forces would be a disaster. And there were other issues at hand too, including the barring of Russian tourists from entering Israel and the Burkov affair. This required our intervention," he added.

Netanyahu arrived in Moscow Thursday morning, and met with Vladimir Putin, before bringing Issachar back to Israel on the official plane.

The visit, just over a month before Israel's March 2 election, "signals further rapprochement in our relations," Netanyahu said. He told reporters that he had

*See* **PARDON**, *Page 2*

# How Jared Kushner put the brakes on immediate annexations

**Amos Harel**

A peace agreement, as was clear from the very start, won't emerge from the diplomatic plan presented by Donald Trump's team this week. Annexation of some of the West Bank settlements? Maybe, but at the end of the week, this outcome too looks a lot less clear than it did when the plan was presented by the U.S. president at midweek.

Despite the high ratings for the live broadcasts, and the quasi-festive atmosphere in the television studios in summing the week up, it appears the plan's implications will be far less dramatic than they seemed when the document was presented in Washington.

Above all, it was another massive airlift that Trump granted his friend, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The political effect has yet to become clear – maybe it will turn out minimal when Israelis cast their votes on March 2 for the third time in 11 months (a matter that Trump found endlessly amazing).

In any case, there was nothing in the U.S. president's move that provided any aid against the real trouble facing Netanyahu this week – the filing of the corruption indictments at the Jerusalem District Court after he had to retreat in his Knesset battle for immunity from prosecution. Even Trump hasn't found a way to extricate Netanyahu from this pit.

Ever since the two leaders' joint press conference Tuesday, the immediate question has been Israel's steps toward annexation. That evening, in leaks to the media and in a remark (subsequently erased) on the Twitter account of one of

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**Using the Shoah as a pretext**
*Opinion, Page 9*

**A vet working with a hippo born on Pablo Escobar's ranch, in Medellin in 2010.** *Albeiro Lopera/Reuters*

# Scientists: Runaway hippos wreak environmental havoc in Colombia

**Ruth Schuster**

Hippopotamuses imported by drug lord and wild-animal aficionado Pablo Escobar were abandoned when his zoo was dismantled upon his death in 1993 and have since gone wild – literally.

His other outsized African animals such as rhinos and giraffes were given new homes, but four hippos were left to their own devices.

Well, they didn't look back. Now there are more than 80 of the semi-aquatic, vegetarian but extremely violent mammals, report scientists from the University of California San Diego with colleagues in Colombia. And they are wreaking havoc on the local ecosystem.

Just how much damage the biggest invasive species in the world is causing to the local lakes over the last 25 years was assessed this week in Ecology. (There was no "safe or practical way to remove the animals," scientists have pointed out, in defense of Escobar's receivers.)

What is the problem with hippos? They do have impressively long incisors, which one might wonder about given their vegetarian lifestyle. But they're slow and amiable, right? No, they are not. Hippos are territorial and will not hesitate to attack if you encroach on their space in the river or lake. If they're having a meal on land and

*See* **HIPPOS**, *Page 13*

**Amir Tibon**

# PM won't like it, but Jared Kushner may still save the peace plan

WASHINGTON – Jared Kushner's statement that he hopes Israel won't annex any settlements before its March 2 election is the first sign since the release of the administration's Middle East plan on Tuesday that he wants the plan to become the subject of actual negotiations.

It is still far from guaranteed that negotiations will start anytime soon between Israel and any of its neighbors. But if Israel were to annex all the settlements and the Jordan Valley area next week, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu initially promised to do, the question would be completely irrelevant. But if Kushner's position regarding annexation – made in an interview with GZERO Media on Wednesday – proves to be the Trump administration's policy, then negotiations are at least theoretically possible.

Kushner's plan is unlikely

*See* **PLAN**, *Page 3*

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